

According to the report issued by the President's Commission on Care for America's Returning Wounded Warriors, 21 percent of active duty, 15 percent of reserve component, and 24 percent of retired or separated service members have a family member or friend who has been forced to leave a job to care for a veteran full-time.

To me, these numbers are both uplifting and heartbreaking at the same time. On one hand, we have family members and loyal friends who have dedicated their own lives to caring for the brave men and women that have sacrificed for our country. On the other hand, this selflessness frequently comes at great personal and professional sacrifice for the caregiver, forcing them to leave their jobs in order to tend to our nation's former soldiers.

As a proud Vietnam War veteran, and as a strong North Floridian and a patriotic American, I believe it is our duty to ensure that the brave men and women who have risked everything to protect our freedom and our country know that they will be protected and cared for when they return home from service.

I'm pleased to say that help is on the way to both the thousands of caregivers across this great nation and the millions of soldiers risking life and limb to guarantee the safety of our country.

Just last week, the U.S. House of Representatives passed The Caregivers and Veterans Omnibus Health Services Act. This legislation will help caregivers of veterans meet the many hardships and sacrifices often associated with the lengthy recovery and rehabilitation of veterans by providing vital assistance and support, including education on how to be a better caregiver; counseling and mental health services to deal with the stresses and rigors of veterans' care; and respite care for family and other caregivers of all veterans. The legislation also provides healthcare coverage and a service stipend for caregivers living with wounded veterans that have served in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Additionally, to help caregivers and veterans living in rural areas access the healthcare services they need, the legislation will begin offering travel reimbursements at the rate of 41.5 cents per mile to help expand existing transportation services to and from VA hospitals and clinics provided by local Veterans Service Organizations.

The bill also makes significant improvements to healthcare services nearly two million servicewomen receive from the VA. In an effort to provide more efficient and effective healthcare services to servicewomen returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, the legislation directs the VA to commission a study on likely health consequences faced by women veterans who have served in either Operations Iraqi Freedom or Enduring Freedom.

Passage of The Caregivers and Veterans Omnibus Health Services Act extends much needed and long overdue support and assistance to veterans' caregivers, and it builds on the historic actions we've taken over the past few years to honor the courage and bravery of our veterans, including: passing the largest funding increase in the VA's 77-year history, resulting in better care for veterans and those returning from Iraq and Afghanistan; ensuring military reservists aren't forced to take a pay cut when called up to active duty by providing small businesses with a tax credit to help cover the costs of employees called to service; enacting the new GI Bill,

which provides veterans with educational benefits to cover housing, tuition, and books; and opening new veterans' outpatient clinics in Tallahassee, Marianna and a newly proposed clinic in Taylor County.

Every service man and woman knows that you never leave another soldier behind. I'm proud to say that America has embraced this same mantra here at home and has worked arduously to provide our nation's veterans with the care, support and service they need and rightly deserve. Taken together, The Caregivers and Veterans Omnibus Health Services Act, coupled with the other advancements we've made over the past few years, will mean a greater quality of life or peace of mind to the brave veterans who have provided us the life and liberty we enjoy each day.